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HEADLINE: Military warns of new rebel offensive in Chechnya

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BODY:

A spate of attacks on Russian facilities in the Chechen capital Grozny could mark the beginning of a new offensive ordered by rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov, military officials said Friday.

Rebels attacked Russian Interior Ministry offices in three districts of the city and fired on four military outposts Thursday night, the military command said, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

"The high intensity of firing at federal forces deployed in Grozny suggests that the militants have started implementing Aslan Maskhadov's order to intensify subversive and terrorist activity," the military command's press service said. It did not give casualty figures in the attacks.

The military has been saying for the past week that Maskhadov, the Chechen president, has ordered rebels to step up their guerrilla campaign against Russian forces starting Friday. But many rebels operate outside Maskhadov's control, and it wasn't immediately clear who attacks the federal troops in Grozny.

The press service said, "Chechen extremists are continuing their resistance and terrorist attacks aimed at forcing the Russian army to end its anti-terrorist operations, pull out of Chechnya and start talks without preconditions."

Russia has said it will consider talking with the rebels, but only if they surrender their weapons, turn over suspected hostage-takers and give up their push for Chechen independence.

The press service said the rebels were laying mines on roads used by military convoys and civilian transportation in western Chechnya. Rebels also tried to hide in populated areas of eastern Chechnya, but villagers rebuffed their attempts to infiltrate, the service said.

Federal forces discovered and destroyed a rebel munitions depot near the village of Shatoi in the southern mountains, the press service said. The troops seized 18 submachine guns, two high-caliber machine guns, four grenade launchers, six anti-tank grenade launchers, two hand grenades, more than 1,000 cartridges and five anti-tank missiles, it said.

In Moscow, the Interior Ministry's press service said Kamil Mirzabekov, the son of a former prime minister of Dagestan, had been freed from captivity in Chechnya.

Mirzabekov was taken hostage 13 months ago, and his abductors had demanded a \$25 million ransom.

Russian troops entered Chechnya in September after Chechnya-based Islamic militants seized several villages in Dagestan, a Russian region that borders Chechnya to the east. Moscow also blamed Chechens for apartment bombings in Russia last September that killed about 300 people.

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(str/jai/nw)

Russian positions in the ruined Chechen capital Grozny came under fire in a spate of hit-and-run rebel attacks, in what may mark the beginning of a rebel counteroffensive, military officials said Friday.

Chechen fighters slipped through Russian lines and apparently hid in the crumbling wasteland of bombed-out houses to stage the attack Thursday evening. Insurgents fired on Interior Ministry soldiers in three separate districts in the city, the military command said, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

The guerrilla fighters also shot at four army guard posts before being beaten back into hiding places within the city, the report said.

Small fire fights are commonplace on most nights in Grozny, but the shootout marked an unusually violent outburst for the city since rebels abandoned it in February and Russian troops took control. Russia said Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov may have ordered Thursday's attacks.

"The high intensity of firing at federal forces deployed in Grozny suggests that the militants have started implementing Aslan Maskhadov's order to intensify subversive and terrorist activity," the military command's press service said in a statement quoted by the news agency.

The report did not mention casualties on either side and could not be independently confirmed.

The military has been saying for a week that Maskhadov has ordered rebels to step up their guerrilla campaign against Russian forces starting Friday. But many rebels operate outside Maskhadov's control, and it wasn't immediately clear who attacked the federal troops in Grozny.

Also Friday, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said it has identified a key source of financing for the Chechen fighters. The intelligence agency has made similar claims in the past, and attributed the rebels' success to help from many quarters including the Baltic countries, Ukraine and Afghanistan, but provided no solid proof.

The FSB said Friday that the Islamic charity Al-Haramain, based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, has channeled funds to the Chechen rebels since 1997, the Interfax news agency reported.

The FSB said the group, which has come under suspicion elsewhere of overstepping its humanitarian goals and instead funding violence, helped supply Maskhadov and leaders of rebel units with weapons, food, medicine and cash.

Al-Haramain's web site says it sends food and blankets to Chechnya and Chechen refugees through its office in the nearby former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, and sponsors Islamic studies throughout the Caucasus region. The site does say anything about providing weapons or cash and does not advocate violence.

Al-Haramain was among six Islamic charities which authorities in Kenya banned from that country in 1998 on suspicion of involvement in the bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi.

Russian troops entered Chechnya in September after Chechnya-based Islamic militants seized several villages in Dagestan. Moscow also blamed Chechens for apartment bombings in Russia last September that killed about 300 people.

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